

## L A T A H . \*

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FEW words upon this mysterious and unexplained mental anomaly, so common amongst the inhabitants of the Straits Settlements and of the Malay Peninsula, will not, I hope, be thought out of place in the pages of this Journal.

I must premise that I write without any of that special knowledge which would be valuable as bearing upon the pathological side of the subject, and also with a Malayan experience strictly limited by my acquaintance with the inhabitants of the Peninsula from Kédah southward to Singapore. I am encouraged, however, to put upon paper the result of my own observations with regard to *latah* by the fact that none of what I may call "the stock" writers upon Malayan subjects seems to have noticed this very noticeable form of disease in any detail; and I am further influenced by the hope, that those better qualified than myself, both by width of experience and by scientific knowledge, will now be led towards the elucidation of phenomena, interesting to most and experienced by all of the residents in this part of the world.

In the few remarks which I have to offer upon the peculiarities of this disease (so I must call it for want of a better term), I purpose to limit myself to those facts which have fallen under my own personal notice and I shall also restrict myself to an account of its exhibition amongst Malays proper. †

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\* It has not escaped me that the word *latah* has been used all through this paper in defiance of all rules of grammar. But I have thought it best not to confuse those who may not be acquainted with the Malay language, and have accordingly used the word *latah* throughout as both adjective and substantive.

† By this term I would include all branches of the Malay race with which I am acquainted.

I thus define my object, so as to bring what I have to say within the very narrow limits of a paper written ( without preparation and at short notice ), rather with the view of throwing out suggestions for the consideration of more capable observers, than as pretending to a tolerably exhaustive treatment of a wide subject.

Lest I should be supposed, however, even after this explanation, to maintain that *latah* is peculiar to those of Malay origin, I must state parenthetically that, in my search after this peculiarity, I have found it, outside the Malay race, weakly exhibited in a very small percentage of Tamils, and strongly exhibited in an equally small proportion of Bengalis. I have noticed traces of the disease in two so-called " Sikhs," and, curiously enough, the most marked sufferer I have ever met was a pure Nubian, whose appearances in these waters, as fireman on board an Ocean steamer, were few and far between.

I have never observed a trace of the disease in any member of any of the Chinese races resident in the Straits. The consideration of the questions of race and latitude as bearing upon *latah* would lead me now too far a-field. I hope to treat this branch of the subject in a future paper, but here, as I have said, I have to do with *latah* amongst Malays only.

What is *latah*?

The derivation of the word seems veiled in the obscurity which covers the origin and nature of the disease itself.

I do not find the word in MARSDEN at all; FAVRE explains it by " indisposition nerveuse chez les femmes, dans laquelle elles " disent tout ce qui leur vient à la bouche."

A more modern lexicographer translates the word as " ticklish," and another recent etymologist connects it, in defiance of spelling, with *melata* to creep. This bold derivation will commend itself, I fancy, chiefly to those classes of English-speaking ladies who connect " nervousness " and " the creeps," but this ingenious surmise, even if correct, only throws the difficulty one step further back.

I can find no derivation which satisfies me either for *latah* or for *melata*.

And now as to *latah* itself, derivation and origin apart.

The Malay acceptation of the word is very wide. It includes all persons of a peculiarly nervous organization, ranging from those who, from their mental constitution, seem absolutely subservient to another's will; down to those who appear merely of a markedly excitable temperament.

A pathologist would of course—and I trust I may now say will—differentiate and classify the different degrees of this mental peculiarity. As a non-scientist, I am content to treat the subject in the broad light in which it is presented to the Malay mind by their own unscientific and comprehensive word *latah*.

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I suppose I am not taking too much for granted when I assume that, by this time, the general character of the Malay is more or less understood by the civilised world. He has recently been called “the Irishman of the East,” with more happiness than generally marks the definitions of “Our Special Correspondent.”

The only point of resemblance between “this and that,” upon which I would lay stress here, is the intense impressionability of the Malay.

Externally impassive the Malays are, as a race, but no one can long have had intimate dealings with them without being struck by their extraordinary susceptibility and peculiar sensitiveness to the influence of what we should call the accidents of every-day-life.

No man, *pace* all Irishmen, is more “touchy” than a Malay.

It is this nervous impressionability which leads to those mysterious *vendettas* and unaccountable *amoks*, which so often place the European completely at fault in dealing with this otherwise charming and loveable people. And it is this intensified nervous sensibility which is, I am convinced, at the base of the peculiarity of which I have to speak. I think it will best serve the purpose—the admittedly humble purpose—I have in view, if I begin at what appears to me to be the bottom of the whole of the phenomena I have to notice, and to work up to the top, noting the divisions into

which these phenomena seem naturally to fall, without any attempt at their scientific classification.

#### CLASS A.

In this class, I would place those subjects who appear to be affected merely by such excess of nervous sensibility as is exemplified by starting unduly at the sound of an unexpected and loud noise, or at the sight of an unexpected and distressing or alarming incident.

So far, it might be said that, under parallel circumstances, a similar exhibition might be expected from any unit of any nation of the human race. But, having observed Malay *latahs* on numberless occasions under the above conditions, I have noticed two peculiarities which seem to differentiate the mental shock which they undergo from that which Europeans experience under like circumstances.

Firstly, their irresistible impulse seems to be to strike out at the nearest object, animate or inanimate, and, secondly, their involuntary exclamation is always characterised by what I must call obscenity.

I cannot here enter into any particulars of this latter characteristic, but, so far as I have observed, and I have observed with careful interest, this element is never absent from the cry of a startled *latah*, who may, on ordinary occasions, appear the essence of propriety.

I touch upon this point, because I believe it to be noteworthy, and when I come to speak of some of the peculiarities of *latah* women, I believe I shall be pardoned by those who may be interested in the pathological view of the question.

#### CLASS B.

In this class, I would place those sufferers whose nervous emotions are unduly excited without apparent, or, at all events, without adequate cause.

To proceed at once to illustration.

I have more than once met with river boatmen, who, when the word *buaya* (alligator) was mentioned, even in the course of casual conversation after camping for the night, would drop whatever they might have in their hands and retire cowering to the cover of the nearest *kajang*.

I have enquired into every case of this description which came under my notice, and in no case could I learn that the man had any special reason for his terror in the way of a personal experience. His friends explained that he was *latah*, and that to them explained everything.

On one occasion, after a curious exhibition of this description, I shot an alligator on the bank next morning. The *latah* was, to my surprise, the first to approach the saurian. Against my earnest entreaties, he proceeded to pull the creature about, and finally forced its mouth open with a piece of firewood.

His persecutors, his fellow-boatmen, stood at a respectful distance.

An hour afterwards, as he was poling up the river, one of the crew called out to this man *buaya*! He at once dropped his pole, gave vent to a most disgusting exclamation, and jumped into the river—an act which shewed that his morbid terror was quite unconnected with what might be supposed to be its exciting cause.

More than one man have implored me not to mention the word *harimau* (tiger), and more than one have gone nearly insane with terror when the word *ular* (snake) was spoken “at” him.

In each case of this description, my Malay companions solved my perplexity, at times very great, by saying “*dia latah, tuan.*”

Similar cases must be familiar to many who read this Journal, but the instance I have quoted of the man who became limp and nerveless from terror at the mention of the word *buaya* and who afterwards was the first to handle a *buaya*, of whose death no one was assured, presents a curious mental contradiction, of which I await the explanation.

I may add that a *parang* (medicine-man) who exhibited extreme distress at my mention of the word “tiger,” was one of the few

men I have met out here who habitually passed nights in the jungle alone. There was here no question of the superstitious reverence which Malays have for this animal, or of their dislike to hearing it called by its regular name. The man's fear was *latah*, and his friends, though apparently much amused, told me that this was his peculiarity, and I was careful not to offend again.

With regard to snakes, perhaps the horror with which these sufferers hear the word, is more marked still.

Such cases, however, as I say, must be familiar to most readers of these pages. The class of cases in which those afflicted are led to believe in the actual presence of a reptile, where the sane only see a bit of string, or a piece of *rotan*, belong to another—the fourth—division of my subject.

#### CLASS C.

To this class seem to belong all those persons who, without encouragement, and involuntarily, imitate the words, sounds or gestures of those around them.

These *latah* subjects cannot, I think, be widely classed under the head of "village idiots."

Their disease is, I have gathered from experience, as a rule, spasmodic, by which I mean that it is marked by intervals of mental regularity, while all other phases of this complaint are, so far as I have observed, persistent.

This imitative propensity is often combined with the other characteristics of *latah*, but I have marked many cases in which it stands by itself.

I have tried, but tried in vain, to lay down any rule for the periodicity of these attacks. They appear to vary in the period of their recurrence, not only as regards one *latah* compared with another, but also in the case of any individual sufferer.

Here I may remark, that the Malays themselves draw a distinct line between *latah* and insanity proper.

Their definition of the narrow border line which separates madness and mental health, does not satisfy me, still less would it



satisfy those kindly moralists who contend that all men are, to some degree, insane. But I am dealing with a Malay subject as treated by Malays, and therefore draw attention to the fact that nothing can be more distinctly defined than their several attitudes towards an *orang gila* and an *orang latah*.

A strong case of this division of *latah*, which has come under my notice, was at Kuâla Jumpol, when I was crossing the Malay Peninsula in 1875.

I there met a young Malay who was of material assistance to our party in pulling our boat across a narrow watershed into the Thi Sureting. His comrades told me the man was *latah*, but I could see nothing in his conduct or conversation which was not perfectly rational.

Some twenty-four hours after making his acquaintance, one night we let off a signalling rocket for the amusement of those who had given us assistance (none of those present had ever seen a rocket before). I was preparing to fire a second rocket myself, when the *latah* pushed me violently aside, snatched the torch from my hand, fired the rocket, and fell down on his face making an unintelligible noise, to all appearance the expression of fear.

I was somewhat startled, such rudeness and violence being quite foreign to the Malay character. When I sought an explanation from the by-standers, I was informed laconically "*latah, tuan.*"

Next morning when I met this man, I found him perfectly rational and perfectly respectful.

I saw him standing alone on the bank as we put off down-stream, and I waved my hand to him. To my surprise he began waving his hand frantically in return, and continued to do so till I lost him at the first bend of the stream. I had begun to whistle an air. He also began whistling. His imitative faculty did not quite lead him to a reproduction of the tune, but the fact of an up-country Malay's whistling at all is sufficiently remarkable. As I rounded the bend, I saw him still waving and heard him still whistling. The steersman to whom I turned came out with the stereotyped formula "*Dia baniak latah, tuan.*" I hope my poor friend's exertions ceased when their exciting cause passed out of sight.

A Malay woman, of respectable position and exceedingly respectable age, was introduced to me some time ago as a strong *latah* subject.

I talked to her for at least ten minutes, without perceiving anything abnormal in her conduct or conversation. Suddenly her introducer threw off his coat. To my horror, my venerable guest sprang to her feet and tore off her *kabayah*. My entreaties came too late to prevent her continuing the same course with the rest of her garments, and in thirty seconds from her seizure the paroxysm seemed to be over.

What struck me most in this unsavoury performance was the woman's wild rage against the instigator of this outrage. She kept on calling him an abandonned pig, and imploring me to kill him, all the time that she was reducing herself to a state of nudity.

One more instance :

I have met a man several times lately who is a very strong *latah* subject. He is cook on board a local steamer, and is naturally (alas, for human nature!) the butt of all the crew, who daily and almost hourly exercise their clumsy wit—the wit of sailors *plus* orientals—at his expense.

All this skylarking, however, had a tragical ending the other day, which illustrates the point of which I am speaking.

This cook was dandling his child forward one day ; one of the crew came and stood before him with a billet of wood in his arms, which he began nursing in the same way as the *latah* was nursing his baby. Presently he began tossing the billet up to the awning, and the cook tossed his child up also, time for time. At last, the sailor opened his hands wide apart and let the wood fall upon the deck, and the cook immediately spread out his hands away from the descending child, who never moved again after striking the boards.

A parallel case will at once suggest itself to all old residents in Singapore, where a Malay *latah* ayah, who saw her master tear up a letter and throw it out of the window, promptly threw a basket of clean clothes which she was carrying out of the opposite window, with the simple apology that she could not help doing so.



These illustrations may be thought trivial and unworthy of a grave subject. I have not selected these four instances from a host of similar personal recollections without consideration.

Two exemplify the mental warp I have attempted to describe, as entirely upsetting all Malay ideas of decency and propriety.

The third seems to shew how this imitative impulse may, on occasions, override what is admittedly one of the strongest feelings in all matured minds.

And the fourth—well—the fourth is a true story, amusing, if embarrassing in its results, and illustrative of the same mental condition as that in the more tragical story which preceded.

#### CLASS D.

The phenomena which belong to this division of my subject seem to call for the skill of a MESMER to elucidate.

I shall content myself, as before, with simply stating what I believe to be the facts of the case, and leave theory to those who come after me.

I have repeatedly been brought into contact with Malays afflicted with *latah*, who, without any effort on my part, have at once and completely abandoned themselves to my will and powers of direction.

I have, at different times, tested my power over many of these subjects, in every conceivable direction, and I have satisfied myself, in each case, that my influence over the diseased mind was practically without limit.

As I cannot claim for myself any special strength of will, I am consequently led to the conclusion that the abandonment of self-control depends upon the mental weakness of the patient and not upon the will-strength of the agent.

By this I mean to convey that every *latah* subject of this class is under influence of others, not so afflicted, to approximately the same extent, and that this influence is not proportional to the varying force of character of the different individuals who may choose to exert it.

I am tempted to supply instances of this phase of *latah*, but I refrain from doing so advisedly. The proof of what I have stated is in every one's hands, but I much question the good taste of anything of the character of an experiment in this direction, unless for a purely scientific purpose.

I have not myself experimented upon a *latah* for some years, and I have never done so without subsequent regret.

For it must be remembered, that the patient who at one's bidding stands on his head, picks up a red-hot piece of iron, or strikes a bystander twice his own size in the face, is perfectly conscious of the mental abasement which he is exhibiting, and resents his degradation most intensely.

I have always felt, however, that such exhibitions degrade the European as much as they do the Malay.

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The last division of the subject which I have to notice here, is the manifestation of the disease exclusively amongst women. The popular character of this Journal forbids my entering into details or illustrations under this heading.

Still I think I may, without seeming unduly realistic, so far touch upon sufferers of this class as to complete my review of the whole subject.

*Latah*, while happily rare amongst young women, is common amongst those of mature age, while of old women a largeish percentage is affected.

In the younger sufferers, as might be expected, there is found an entire absence of "virtue" and moral self-restraint (seldom a prominent characteristic of Malay belles).

But it is very startling to find that the disease, where present in females of advanced age, manifests itself, when set in action in the same direction, in a way which seems entirely to contradict the accepted laws of our bodily constitution.

That a word, a look, or a gesture can in a moment lead a woman of seventy-five to conduct herself like a hetaira of twenty, is a phe-

nomenon so opposed to natural laws, that I seek in vain for its satisfactory explanation.

I have already remarked that the exclamation of a startled *latah* is always characterised by indecency, and connecting these two extremes of my subject, I cannot but think that the whole of this mental anomaly might possibly be traced to some structural peculiarity which has hitherto escaped the specialist's attention.\*

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\*I have been collecting for some time past cases as regards *latah* subjects who have also committed *amok*, but facts I have collected are as yet too sparse for me to venture upon any matured generalization.

That the mental fact underlying the two "diseases" are identical, I have no sort of doubt, and I hope to be able soon to shew that this is so by those valued figures which cannot lie.

At present, however, whether from defective information, or from wilful misinformation, here is a flaw in my premises which destroys, as far as Arithmetic is concerned, my whole induction.